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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PORT MORESBY 000381

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FOR EAP/ANP

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [BP](#)

SUBJECT: SOLOMON ISLANDS: PM KICKS AUSTRALIA IN THE SHIN

REF: A) PORT MORESBY 353 B) PORT MORESBY 203

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert Fitts, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy Port
Moresby, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: The decision by the Solomon Islands PM to PNG the Australian High Commissioner seems a reflection of his personal (and rather adolescent) frustration over the large RAMSI role in Solomon decision making. He does not appear to have a specific strategy in taking a poke at his country's largest benefactor. His September 13 meetings with special envoys from Australia and New Zealand went poorly and Australia is likely to take some steps in retaliation. Both sides have been careful thus far to confine the friction to the bilateral relationship and try to keep RAMSI above the fray. Ambassador intends to express his personal concern over these developments to SIG FM Patteson Oti, who we believe backed the PM's decision. END SUMMARY

2.(C) In a Sept 12 letter to Prime Minister Howard, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Sogavare declared Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole persona non grata. This followed a Sept 11 phone call between the two PMs in which Howard declined Sogavare's request to withdraw Cole. Separately, the SIG advised GOA that Cole had spent too much time talking to opposition figures and had opposed two of the terms of reference for Sogavare's Commission of Inquiry into the April riots. Of course, in doing so, Cole was respectively; doing his job and reflecting Australian government policy.

3.(C) In fact, Sogavare and the people behind him have been increasingly rankled by the large role that Australia and other RAMSI members play in Solomon Islands affairs (ref B). A main bone of contention is the Commission of Inquiry that Sogavare has launched into the April riots which seems designed to shift blame on the police and away from his political cronies who are in jail charged with inciting the violence and now with planning murder (Ref A). Encouraged by the RAMSI-provided advisors, the Attorney General had challenged the terms of reference for that Commission in court. Sogavare has since repeatedly charged that Australia was improperly interfering the Solomon Islands courts. On Sept 7, the Solomon court rejected the A/G's petition, which would seem to refute the PM's contention, but Sogavare has continued to charge improper Australian interference.

4.(C) Despite the court decision, Australia and other observers remain extremely concerned with the PM's motivation for the Commission and two senior envoys from Australia and New Zealand were already scheduled to meet with the PM Sept 13. Deputy Secretaries of the Foreign Departments, respectively Australia's

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David Ritchie and New Zealand's John Larkindale arrived in the midst of this furor with a widely expanded agenda.

5.(C) The atmospherics around the meeting were not good. Sogavare canceled the scheduled 8:30 session, claiming it hadn't been set up through proper channels. In a radio interview, he said the meeting was rescheduled for 2:30, but sent no other notice. When the envoys showed up, the PM's staff professed no knowledge of any new meeting.

6.(C) The meeting itself, when it finally convened, was little better. There was no meeting of the minds, with Sogavare refusing to back down on his move and the envoy's pointing out how difficult this made it for them to justify their nation's large-scale commitment to Solomon Islands.

7.(C) We understand (please hold close) that as a next step Australia now has cleared, but not finally approved, a proposal to cancel all outstanding visas held by Solomon Island parliamentarians. Each would be reconsidered on a case-by-case basis. This would have some real teeth as the only non-Australian routes out of Solomon Islands are twice weekly flights to Port Moresby and to Vanuatu. In addition, Australian/New Zealand personnel with RAMSI would be barred from participating in the Commission of Inquiry.

8.(C) COMMENT: Observers are at a loss to come up with a rational political motivation for Sogavare's action. Though many in the political elite will be privately pleased to see him take a poke at Australia, the general public would become concerned indeed if it perceived that his actions would jeopardize RAMSI's ability to keep the peace, which has made an enormous improvement to their lives. Any such unease could cost him heavily in the no-confidence vote now scheduled for October 12.

9.(C) There may be no careful rationale. Clearly, Sogavare

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resents Australia's role. One month back, he complained to the Ambassador that RAMSI (by which he meant Australia) should be "here to help us decide. But they should not make the decisions." The main impression we gained from his demeanor is that of a frustrated adolescent, dependent and resenting that dependence; wanting to go on an all night binge without anyone telling him he shouldn't.

10.(C) With the concurrence of Australian authorities, we believe it most effective for our two countries convey separate messages, but with common themes. Consequently, Ambassador intends to express to SIG FM Patteson Oti, his personal concern over the recent steps, making it clear that an official reaction may also be in the offing.

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